

PEOPLE POWER - FOR COOPERATION OR DISRUPTION
Essex County PTA
Mar. 6, 1973

The Theme of your conference intrigues me greatly - there are great areas of debate constantly flowing, as to the merits of the reality of "Power", as well as to the wisdom of people who seek or wield it

Possession of Power, of itself, is no automatic acknowledgment of the virtue of Power.

Edmund Burke (I believe) stated: "Power tends to corrupt; absolute Power corrupts absolutely." (e.g. Police Power when unchecked)

But also: "Vox Populi - Vox Deus"

The Virtue that lies in the possession and wielding of Power, is to be found, not in Power itself, but in the wisdom of those possessing it, their self-discipline and dedication, but above all, in the integrity of the individuals who chose to lead those in Power

(Witness the great difference, to the poor people of America, in the leadership contrasts between the Southern-born, wheeler-dealer cattle-rancher, Lyndon B. Johnson, and the California-born, descendant of Quaker heritage, Richard M. Nixon.)

We, who identify with the great institution of Public Education in America, possess much more Power than we are prone to realize/

Not necessarily do I refer to economic or political power, altho the Power is there....but rather to the Power to mold fashion, shape, influence the characters as well as the minds of the millions of Americans who in a few short years will be guiding the destinies of this great country.

For instance, One of our greatest and most serious domestic problems is the heritage of injustice, hypocrisy and exploitation that has existed throughout the history of our nation - a nation built upon the thesis that a Free People must first be a literate and enlightened people!

The education of American children therefore, was at least ostensibly one of the great responsibilities of our civilization, and of the viability of our political philosophy.

To define Education as a process of cramming information about Things into youthful skulls, while perpetuating unjust, indecent patterns of life about People, is a travesty.....yet Education is doing, has done, and continues to defend its actions, ^{exposes} ~~mislead~~ in these regards.

Carl Rowan, syndicated columnist recently commented upon the findings of the U.S. Senate's Select Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity, a 13,000 page printed record, saying:

"Public Education is failing millions of American children who are from racial and language groups, or who are simply poor."

The report acknowledges that the program is eminently successful for most Americans, meaning of course the white middle- and upper-class groups for whom it was designed.

To bring the discussion a bit closer home, Robert Curvin, Community Affairs Specialist at Rutgers University said recently: "Education in Newark (which applies to every urban center in the USA - EC) takes place in an atmosphere of continuing crisis; an incessant state of alarm, political, moral and administrative."

Are these assessments new to us? Products of militant imaginations? Results of latter day agitation and rhetoric from outside malecontents and troublemakers?

Let's look backward for a few moments - someone said "history is but a prelude to the present." How have we been building the minds, characters, attitudes, dreams, aspirations of American children - we educators and parents?

While in Pittsburgh 1930-34, I discovered statistics released by NEA from data compiled by the US Office of Education findings for that school

Invested in
school facilities
per child in
school

College - where
population
per million
citizens

(year 1931-2: NY-Cal--\$206; Va-18; Ark 112; Black \$24 & 27
1943-4 " 580 12 So.St. 222; " 870

(Yet, startling tribute to Black hunger and quest for higher Ed...1951

Unesco report US 14,70....Canada 4400Japan 5200....Gr.Brit 2200;

But. US Blacks 6000-----1951, 90,000 Collst....

1970 350,000 to 15,000 per Million

In the 30's and 40's

Pittsburgh Vocational School "in the Mill" . The Pgh Courier and white, operators-
Englewood school system: training good" house servants. no college Prep.
(from 1914 to 1962 before the courts could correct this)
(Dumait, Madison, etc.)

Segregated schools from Princeton South...tremendous drop-out rate of
Blacks, from totally segregated, inferior Black schools to N.S. integ

New Charter and my job in South Jersey...recalcitrant, rebellious
boards, frightened Black teachers.

Cinnaminson Twp 11 2- and 3-room schools....forced to improve
for white children through integration.

But, North Jersey too Black Jr. H.S. in Englewood, 4 blocks from big,
modern white Jr. H.S. - not until early 60's did Courts change it.

Example of insensitivity of white labor of predominately black
school in East Orange) "Why not our lovely spirituals...Old
Black Joe and Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground."

Many, many examples of professional failure....perhaps the most
dramatic and recent display of negatively applied Power:

the "dastardly" ganging-up of organized educators against the
strongest, clearest-thinking, imaginative Commissioner of
Education we've had in N.J. in the past 40 years....for
Power Control of the system...for perpetuation of that which
has been...for death of innovative programming to correct the
evils of the past. (One man's opinion)-(but from one man who
spent 14 years in the State Dept of education to get a measure
of administrative and of organized rank-and-file ldehp.)

But, the N.J. Charter change did not accomplish its intended purpose - it brought
improvement, beyond a doubt, and the extra-ordinary drop-out rates of South
Jersey Black children has been reduced and quality of education improved,
to a considerable degree.

Meantime, increased polarization of races in urban centers, extension of
housing segregation, has intensified segrega (de facto) in the North.

The practice of mobilising Power for the purpose of seeking relief from a problem through Legislative action and Court action, is a universal American recourse and responsibility.....only by such processes can we keep the "rules of the game" clearly defined.

So, Black folk, seeking relief from racial restrictions in pursuit of Education moved up to the monumental decision of the U.S. Supreme Court of 1954 - and again, we saw a resurgence of anti-Black movement in the educational institutions of the Nation, and of N.J.,.....

Legal and extra-legal segregation so blatantly practiced before adoption of the N.J. Charter, became de facto segregation in the newly-labelled "Neighborhood" School concept. E.g. Successful evasion at West Kenney and Robert Treat Schools in 30 's and 40's and 50's...now a sacred principle.

The evidence of double-standards, insensitivity, calloused racism in educational circles is devastating!!!

Today, we are living in a constant atmosphere of turbulence, in every facet of our Educational institutional structure:

Teachers, with their new-found organisational Power, now perceive Boards of Education as adversaries rather than teammates//and vice-versa;

Parents and administrators, parents and teachers, likewise have adopted an adversary stance, each vying for an "All or Nothing" Power Control over conditions that are anathema to the other.

The art of compromise, in the interest of the Children, for whom the institution has its being, is a forgotten element.

Children, taking their cues from angry elders and defensive teachers, whom they are presumed to respect and emulate, are doing unspeakable things to school properties, to the dignity of their elders and to the concept of discipline which our culture is supposed to inculcate.

Shorter hours, fewer responsibilities, less work, more privileges are the professional demands, even in urban centers already facing bankruptcy, while parents are demonstrating to emphasize the short-changing they believe their children are receiving.

What is it that parents really want, other than a cut in their school and real estate taxes?

The fact of the matter is, that the minority group parent, the poor parent has no way of knowing what he wants for his children, specifically, except better results...he hasn't a blue-print to offer...he is not the trained educator....all he knows is what he does not want for them

And...the fact of the matter is, contrary to our idealistic and nationalistic myths....the vast majority of parents, poor or rich, have never been taught the full lesson of what it means to be a parent, and be trained for that role.

...teachers and their administrators, are really the only trained guides and counsellors our children have.

So, the parent is crying in loud tones, with his demonstrations, sit-ins and boycotts, the only thing he can say "Give my kids a better break"

Is this, then, subversive, stupid, disruptive and anti-American? Or is it the kind of social conflict that has within it the seeds of constructive development necessary for growth in the institution of Education, as conflict so often contains, when viewed intelligently.

Are teachers, administrators, parents really thinking of the needs of their children, and of their full, respective responsibilities in each instance - or are they being motivated by their sense of status, of their pride, of their victories and losses of the so-called effectiveness of their Power!

Have they, do they, spend just one-tenth of the time figuring how best to open and retain clear channels of communication between themselves, for constructive and collaborative approach to their highly important, joint task? Do you really think this kind of investment is being made????

If honest, clear-thinking and inearnest about their respective responsibilities each will start with acknowledgment of several urgent needs to which, cooperatively, they can address themselves; come to some common agreements as to determinations or alternatives that must be reached:

1. To segregate or to desegregate, based upon familiarity with the vast store of reference material available, in measurement of impact of forced separation upon both sides of the issue.
2. If the latter course is to be pursued, ascertaining those actions which offer the more immediate, practical and attainable alternatives upon which to proceed;
3. Choose whether to "wait another century" for the physical elimination of the inferior ghetto school, as a promise to parents with children now confined to those schools; or, to find some other interim plans that will relieve the pressure for a considerable number of Black children;
4. Continue to operate upon the flagrant false assumption that teacher training curricula and experience, properly equip America's teachers with a working knowledge of the intricacies of American prejudices and negatively-oriented intergroup relations. (my workshop exper.)
This applies across the board/Black & White, Anglo & Latin, to.
5. Take a great amount of time to examine and analyze the social phenomenon that accompanies the debate on "being"...the semantics of the issue; the impact of the demagogue and the rhetoric he has fashioned for us; the absence of any common-sense, earnest and fact-finding quest, with respect to this one over-blown question

Above all, it is incumbent upon us to consider seriously one of the almost unbelievable weaknesses in the preparation of American teachers - Human Relations training!

These determinations cannot be reached; these alternatives sifted, in any constructive way, except through intensive, consistent and cooperative effort of parents, teachers and administrators. First, I fear, we will have to extend the philosophy of FIA deeper and more widely, into all schools - not just the affluent. We've

got to practice the art of getting along together, thinking and acting together, until it "comes naturally." This is Real People Power! We have not had much opportunity - nor have we used the opportunities we have had - to refine this art - develop this kind of continuing relationship.

Then, we must address ourselves, item by item, step by step, alternative by alternative, to the courses of action that will meet the needs of our children, however deprived their background years; however advanced their intellectual and social development. Our adult pride, status and sense of Power have absolutely no part to play in arriving at these choices. Is this really asking too much???

Parents and teachers have inherited the most awesome responsibility, as I have inferred frequently. Ours is the task of preparing human beings, youthful America, in their intellectual growth, physical condition, emotional stability and spiritual qualities, that they may be adequately equipped to face the demands that will be placed upon them, in this shrunken, turbulent globe, just a few short, dangerous years ahead. The social habits to which we expose them daily, the precepts and examples we set for them, are the teachings that will guide them as they mingle with the peoples of the world. Do you really believe that we are meeting this terrible challenge???

In our Educational field, as nowhere else in the human experience, we need to develop the art of decent human relations, as a social solvent to the conflict breeding practices of racism, the poisonous impact of hatred across ethnic and religious lines - the evil lessons that society continues to inculcate in the hearts and minds of children. You, teachers and parents, are the guardians of this valuable institution that has within its means the Power to transform the world.